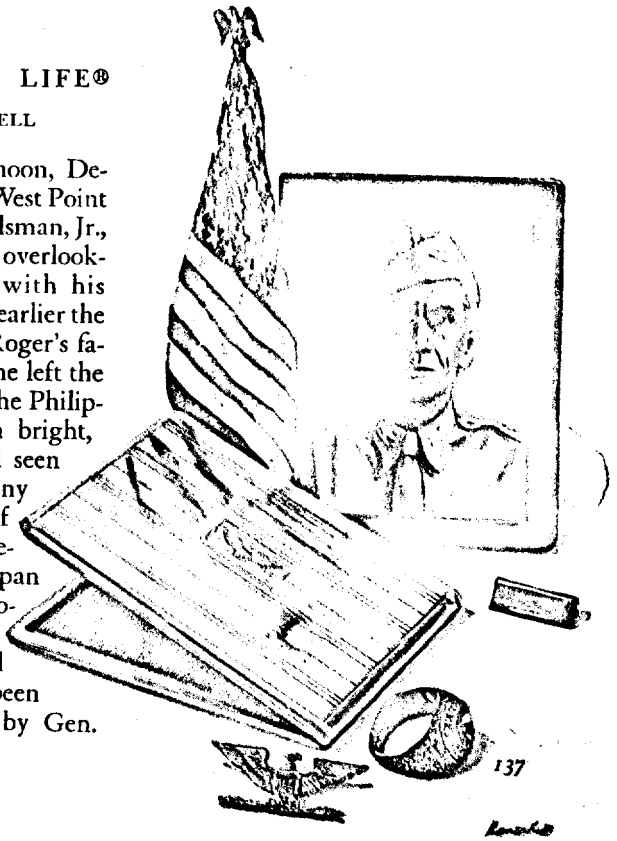
READER'S DIGEST FEB. 1964

The Secret Mission of Lieutenant Hilsman

The story of a young soldier who kept on fighting long after he was knocked out of action



DRAMA IN REAL LIFE®

By John G. Hubbell

On Sunday afternoon, December 7, 1941, West Point Cadet Roger Hilsman, Jr., was strolling along a path overlooking the Hudson River with his mother. Only a few weeks earlier the two had said good-by to Roger's father, an Army colonel, as he left the United States for duty in the Philippines. Emma Hilsman, a bright, vivacious Army wife, had seen her husband leave for many trouble spots in 25 years of marriage, but now the deteriorating relations with Japan filled her with concern. Colonel Hilsman, who knew the Philippine Islands and their people well, had been one of a group sent for by Gen.

→ CIA 1-05 (Hilsman, Roger, Jr.)

Douglas MacArthur, then commander in chief of U.S. and Philippine forces.

When the colonel's overseas orders had arrived, he had hurried to West Point to say good-by to his son. As he was leaving, he apologized for not having had time to get a farewell gift, and insisted that Roger take the newest thing he had—an aluminum cigarette case. On December 7, Roger thought of this incident, and remembered that it was now almost Christmas. He suggested to his mother that they find a present for the colonel in the Thayer Hotel gift shop, not far from where they were walking.

In the shop, music issued from a radio. Then, stunning as a thunderclap, came a news flash: Japan had attacked Pearl Harbor! The air assault had been devastating. With the enemy's strike continuing elsewhere in the Pacific, the Philippines were sure to be a center of action.

Emma Hilsman went deathly pale, but in a few minutes she was the colonel's lady again. "Your father knows how to take care of himself," she said quietly. Roger nodded. He knew his father's fierce will and the skills he had acquired from a lifetime of soldiering with distinction.

During the following weeks, Roger and his mother learned from the newspapers that Colonel Hilsman had been assigned to the command of a U.S. Army garrison to train 2000 Filipino volunteers. The garrison was at Davao, on Mindanao, southernmost of the Philippine Islands. On December 7, Japanese dive bombers had swept down on Davao, which the enemy prized as a staging base for an invasion of the Dutch East Indies. On December 20, the city fell to a Japanese task force of cruisers, destroyers, aircraft carriers and assault ships.

After that there was no word of Colonel Hilsman. The War Department knew nothing. For Emma and Roger Hilsman, the flame of hope flickered low.

Then one day Roger was visited at West Point by Father Manuel Ortiz, Jesuit chaplain to Philippine President Manuel Quezon. When Quezon and his party were leaving, the priest said, they had stopped at Negros, an island north of Mindanao. There they met Colonel Hilsman. The Filipino troops proudly told of their fight at Davao under his leadership. After the hopeless battle, they had made an incredible 31-day march across the mountainous Mindanao wilderness. No man had ever traversed that interior before, but Colonel Hilsman had led his group through. He would not permit anyone *not* to make it!

The colonel had asked Father Ortiz to get word to his family that he was alive. The priest recited for Roger the battle cry of the Filipino troops under Colonel Hilsman's command: *Pot-i-na ka Davao!* (Kill now for Davao!) After his visitor had left, Roger slowly, carefully scratched inside his West Point class ring the words Father Ortiz had

brought him: *Pot-i-na ka Davao.*

But jubilance was soon shattered. The War Department reported that Colonel Hilsman was a prisoner of war; he had surrendered when the enemy threatened the slaughter of every last captive from Bataan and Corregidor unless all U.S. forces in the Philippines laid down their arms. There was no indication whatever of where, in the wide East Asian sphere of Japanese control, he had been imprisoned.

In his room, Roger sat alone, thinking. Suddenly the war had become very personal to him. He made a vow that somehow he would find out where his father was, and fight his way to him.

In June 1943, 2nd Lt. Roger Hilsman, Jr., was graduated from West Point. Advanced training at Fort Benning, Ga., and maneuvers with the 97th Infantry Division in Louisiana followed. From Army Intelligence he learned that the senior American officers captured in the Philippines had been taken to Formosa. This meant that he *must* get combat duty in the Pacific. One day an urgent call came for volunteers for "an extremely dangerous mission." Jungles were mentioned in the dispatch. "Jungles" meant the Pacific!

Thus, in May 1944, Roger was among 2600 reinforcements on their way to join Merrill's Marauders, an outfit soon to earn worldwide fame by helping to break the Japanese hold on Burma. Maj. Gen. Frank D. Merrill's force had just seized an airstrip near a Japanese stronghold at Myitkyina, in northern Burma. The Marauders were barely hanging on; they needed help fast.

The battle for the Myitkyina airstrip was to rage a nightmarish 55 days, and Roger and the other new arrivals learned quickly that life depended on nerve, instinct and luck. Apart from battle casualties, the men were ravaged by dysentery, malaria, jungle rot. At the end, there would remain of Roger's company only 23 out of 232 enlisted men, and the entire officer complement of six had to be replaced twice. Roger lasted a long time—25 days—before his number came up.

He was leading an advance patrol, probing deep into the jungle, seeking out positions of enemy strength. Suddenly he signaled his scouts to a halt; he had seen the glint of metal in a clump of bush ahead. In the next instant, gunfire burst from the bush. Roger felt his carbine ripped from his grasp, saw it go dancing through the air, saw his lead scout fall. Then a blow on the chest sent him sprawling into a shallow ditch below a low rice-paddy wall. There was a tingling numbness in his right side, and for a few seconds he lay there thinking, "It can't be serious. I can't leave this war—not yet!"

As Japanese soldiers moved toward him, he heaved himself up, lurched over the paddy wall. Rifle fire slammed into the wall; he ran low toward the protective cover of deeper jungle, reached it, found his

other two scouts. The three headed back toward their own lines through the protection of jungle shadow.

With their lines in sight, Roger fell unconscious. The battalion medical officer found 16 bullet holes in his uniform, and four bullets had struck home. Three had entered above his right hipbone. The fourth had been headed straight for his heart, but had been deflected by something in his right breast pocket. It was the aluminum cigarette case his father had given him at West Point. Obviously, Roger still had unfinished business in this world.

Surgery lasted a painful eternity as Dr. Gordon Seagrave, the distinguished "Burma Surgeon," worked slowly, skillfully. Roger was then evacuated to an Army hospital in Shimbwiyang. There, after weeks of convalescence, he began haunting British and U.S. headquarters. What were Allied plans for Formosa? Was anything known of the prison camps there? Finally, he learned that the Japanese, fearing an invasion of Formosa, had removed the senior U.S. officer-prisoners to a prison camp near Mukden, Manchuria!

Roger was warned, however, that many officers captured early in the war had been tried for "war crimes" and executed. Also that conditions of transport from the Philippines to Formosa had been horrible: prisoners had been packed into the holds of ships and given little or no food or water; disease had killed them by the thousands.

But Roger would not believe that his father was dead. The young lieutenant determined now to get to Mukden. He hitchhiked a plane ride to Kunming, China, hoping to line up a field assignment with an outfit fighting near Manchuria. "No more combat for you," he was told. He went to Ledo, India. Everywhere the same answer: "With your wounds, the war is over. Go home." But Roger knew that his own personal war was far from finished.

Finally, he went to Col. William "Ray" Peers, head of the Office of Strategic Services operations in Burma. Peers asked a curt question: "Why do you want more combat?"

"I'm a professional, sir. I've had only 25 days of this war. I'd like another crack at it."

Peers figured, correctly, that the war meant something special to this young officer. And he could use a West Pointer with a knowledge of jungles. "Okay, lieutenant," he said, "I've got a job for you."

Roger's assignment was as OSS liaison officer to the British 14th Army in Burma. Four months later, Peers gave him command of his own guerrilla battalion. Now, with 300 Burmese, he cut down enemy patrols, fell on outposts, supply depots, trains, truck convoys. So effective was Roger's guerrilla band that the Japanese finally pulled some 3000 men out of the fighting in the north to run him down. Still, each day he and his guerrillas rained havoc on Japanese concentrations in

a different area, then faded off to some distant fastness.

By midsummer 1945, the Allies controlled Burma, and Roger, who had been promoted to captain, disbanded his guerrillas and reported back to Peers, inquiring when he could leave for Mukden. Colonel Peers now knew of Roger's determination to find his father, but he could only give him another liaison assignment, in southern China.

Then, even as Roger was en route to his new post, word arrived of the atomic strikes on Japan and that the U.S. high command had ordered that the officer-prisoners at Mukden were to be rescued. Peers instantly sent word to Roger: he was to draw a parachute and proceed immediately to Hsian, in northern China, to join the rescue team.

Roger took off for Hsian at midnight, and arrived there after dawn —only to find that the rescue team had already left. He was hustled aboard a B-24 and followed. There had been no formal Japanese surrender, but the emperor had directed his forces to cease resistance. It was feared, however, that the fanatical Kwangtung Army in Manchuria might slaughter its captives and keep on fighting.

Hours later, Mukden hove into view and, as the plane approached an airfield, Roger prepared to jump. But the pilot stopped him; two Russian aircraft were on the airstrip below, which meant that the Japanese had surrendered and it was safe to land. On the field, a Japanese general explained that orders to surrender had just arrived; that the rescue team which had parachuted in ahead of Roger had been captured, but was now being released. The general told Roger how to find the prison camp near the city.

At the gate of the camp, a GI sentry snapped a salute, pumped Roger's hand. Roger braced himself to ask the question he had fought his way across the world to ask: "Is there a Colonel Hilsman here?"

The answer came fast and clear. "Yes, sir, that barracks there. Second floor."

Roger stared at the sentry, trying to take in what he had heard. Then, by an immense effort of will, he was moving, approaching the building. He was aware of men coming forward and shouting at him, but he walked past them, as if in a trance. Slowly he climbed the stairs.

There, at the top, sitting on a

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Father and son reunited. The colonel is wearing a clean, sharply-pressed uniform that he had kept with him for three and a half years—against the day of his release

wooden bunk, was his father. Three and a half years of imprisonment had left him thin to the point of gauntness, but the old military bearing was there. For a long, uncertain moment, each searched the other's face. The older man rose slowly, a look of amazed, unbelieving recognition in his eyes. Softly, almost inaudibly, he said, "My God. My God." Then the two soldiers embraced, and Roger said, "I've brought you a present, sir." In his hand was the aluminum cigarette case his father had given him almost four years before.

ROGER HILSMAN, JR., turned to scholarly and diplomatic pursuits after World War II. He obtained a Ph.D. from Yale University, is today U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs. He has written several distinguished books, including *Strategic Intelligence and National Decisions.*

Even-Steven

John Gould in The Christian Science Monitor

WHEN I was 14, Father introduced me to working at the halves—that's an arrangement with a neighbor where one of you puts up the raw material and the other does the work and you divide the harvest half and half. All one winter we chopped wood for a man on Beech Hill Road. It was a rigged deal from the beginning. We had plenty of wood standing, and didn't need to go afield. But this man was struck by some adversity and could use a little help.

Here in Maine, ours has always been a careful society in this respect. You don't just walk over and leave a basket of charity on somebody's doorstep—this would offend him and leave him beholden. Instead, Father rigged the scheme that we would appear to be needful of some wood, and by offering it to us at the halves this man would be the recipient giver. In this way we would do him the kindness of putting up his wood for a winter or two, and perhaps leave him with a few cords he could sell for cash.

The man agreed, although he well knew our basic intent, and that winter my father and I spent our Saturdays in the woodlot until we had some 30 cords of wood in neat piles. On warmer Saturdays the man would come down and see how we were doing, and he said he had no complaints—pile for pile it was even-steven.

One day we had our half piled in our dooryard, and the man had his. What he did with it was his business. He did, most certainly, have an accrued asset for which he owed nobody a cent or a thank-you. He had done business on the halves, and his half was as honest, and as self-gained, as ours. Whatever the adversity had been, his head was properly high.

The nicest thing out of this experience was the lengthening shadows of evening, when we walked down the road for home. The light would be shining from the kitchen window, and we'd become starved into the room where Saturday baking had contrived an atmosphere of unequaled delight. Father told me that kindness is a two-way deal, like a double-bitted ax, sort of, and it blesses in both directions. I guess so, because the man came around afterward and said he was glad he'd been able to help us out.